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AUTHOR Scollon, Ron
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ABSTRACT

Educational practice and barriers to full participation of Alaska Natives in postsecondary education were examined in an ethnographic study begun in October 1980 by the University of Alaska. Focus was on the institutional placement, organization, and functioning of gatekeeping encounters within the university, primarily the central Fairbanks campus. This report aims partially to encourage members of the university community--faculty and students--to think through the problem of institutional barriers. The participation rate of Alaska Natives in postsecondary education was originally seen as a problem of gaining entrance and movement through the university. However, viewing the problem as one of gaining access to the resources of the university was too simple to be productive, and the notion of retention implied another contrasting model that was also too simple a model of the relationship between a university and its client population. In addition the "gates" of the institution must be understood as consisting of networks of institutional practices and values. The degree to which the University of Alaska was perceived as a total institution was another issue. There appeared to be a fairly high level of discrepancy between embedded institutional structures and stated attitudes along with fairly large differences between faculty and student perceptions of the functions and structure of the university. These differences make it difficult to unambiguously point to a particular situation as the root of the retention problem. An example of different perceptions of the nature of the institution is the complaint voiced by students that faculty members are paternalistic; many students perceived faculty "help" as a pressure and some cited it as a reason for dropping out. (SW)

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GATEKEEPING: ACCESS OR RETENTION?[1]

Ron Scollon
Center for Cross-Cultural Studies
University of Alaska, Fairbanks
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the American Anthropology Association,
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1.0 Communication patterns and retention in a public university

Alaska Natives are not achieving educational equity within current practice in higher education in the state of Alaska. The University of Alaska, as the only publicly supported institution of higher education within the state, bears the burden of examining educational practice and identifying barriers to full participation of Alaska Natives in postsecondary education. We have been conducting an ethnographic study of the University of Alaska with the goal of describing the institutional placement, organization, and functioning of gatekeeping encounters within the university, focusing primarily on the central Fairbanks campus. Our hope is that by locating and defining potential organizational barriers to educational equity within the university system, this study will provide the background by which more pointed research and institutional strategies may be developed for dealing with these barriers.

Modern bureaucratic and technological institutions such as a university control the flow of personnel into and through the institution with a series of "gates." In the university, gatekeepers such as counselors, teachers, and administrators depend on fair, objective procedures of evaluation to ensure equity in opportunity and mobility. However, recent research such as that by Erickson (Erickson 1976; Erickson and Shultz 1977, in press) has shown that while gatekeepers try to maintain objectivity, this objectivity is undermined by two kinds of "leakage" from outside factors. The first

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of these outside factors that provides "leakage" is communicative style. Where the individual and the gatekeeper involved have different communicative styles, there is a strong potential for decisions to be made which are discriminatory against the individual.

A second kind of "leakage" into the objectivity of the gatekeeping encounter is co-membership. Where the gatekeeper and the other individual share some significant particularistic attributes there is a powerful effect of increased advocacy by the gatekeeper on behalf of the individual. These two forms of "leakage" clearly indicate that the gatekeeping encounter is not objectively sealed off but is subject to the effects of other influences. The structural and organizational properties of the situation only partially determine both the activities within the situation and the outcomes. Particularistic attributes of both the gatekeeper and the other participants also significantly affect both activities within the situation and the outcomes.

While the work of Erickson and others (Gumperz, Jupp and Roberts 1979; Gumperz and Roberts 1978; Gumperz and Tannen 1979) suggests that much may be achieved by careful study of face-to-face interaction in gatekeeping situations, it is also clear that any proposed institutional changes must be related to an understanding of institutional and societal organization. Specifically, there are two issues to be faced in proposing changes in the internal dynamics of gatekeeping situations. In discussing the first of these, Erickson and Shultz point to a serious policy dilemma raised by their work. While it may be possible to manipulate the variables of communicative style and co-membership in gatekeeping encounters, it may be specifically prohibited by the 1964 Civil Rights Act to do so. As a result, addressing the problem of discrimination in gatekeeping situations

by looking only at the dynamics of those situations may increase the potential for neglecting other serious societal and institutional issues.

The second issue to be faced is that organizational changes that may bring about a greater access by students to teachers and counselors of like communicative style may simultaneously place teachers and counselors in an increasingly negative position. Without corresponding organizational changes, some teachers and counselors may have to provide a greater degree of advocacy than they are institutionally capable of doing. Because in many institutions members of ethnic and other minorities are underrepresented (as well as located at less influential institutional positions), this increased load of advocacy for the minority students may make it difficult or impossible for the advocate to accomplish his or her professional goals.

This report is our first report on this study which was begun in October of 1980. It is being written at this time in order to encourage other members of the university community, students and faculty alike, to work with us in thinking through the problem of institutional barriers to educational equity, particularly those barriers which affect Alaska Native students.

2.0 The problem with "access"

As this study was originally formulated, the "problem" was seen as being one of access. As we originally thought through the problem of how and where Alaska Native students might be finding the university less than responsive to their needs, we phrased this issue as one of institutional barriers to entrance and movement through the institution. As we have gathered the views of students and faculty, however, it is becoming apparent that there may be another important model of the university informing people's

perceptions of the gatekeeping situation. One phrasing was that of a student who said, "It seems like the only thing the university cares about is keeping us here." Another student in approaching a teacher about dropping out of the university voiced the fear that she would not be allowed to do so. This student was particularly afraid to approach her counselor who she felt would be very angry with her and try to prevent her leaving. Other students, when talking about withdrawal from the university seem to prefer wordings such as "going home" or "trying something else" to wordings such as "dropping out". The faculty phrasing of the complementary view is seen in the concern with the problem of "retention."

2.1 Total institutions

Comments of this sort have led us to consider Goffman's notion of the total institution as a possible model for viewing the problem of gatekeeping. Goffman (1961) introduced the idea of the total institution, an institution in which the members sleep, play, and work in one sphere under a single authority, where each phase tends to be carried out in the company of others of the same class, all activities are scheduled, and all activities constitute a single, rational institutional plan. Goffman, of course, points out that no one institution displays all of these features and at the same time no single feature of the total institution is not shared by other, non-total institutions. His method is one of "ideal types". Among the total institutions one might consider, Goffman mentions prisons, mental hospitals, POW camps, army barracks, work camps, homes for the blind and aged, and monasteries. His own study is of a mental hospital and so we need to be careful not to attribute to the university

characteristics of such a different social institution. In spite of these cautions, however, it may be useful to consider to what extent we may think of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks campus as a total institution.

It is clear that for some students, especially those who live in the dormitories, the university plays a central role in organizing their sleeping arrangements, their recreational opportunities, and of course their work. Each of these activities except in rare cases is carried out in the presence of others of like class, fellow students of the same age and even class standing in the university. While not all activities are scheduled, the class schedules of students dictate to a great extent when any other activities may be performed. Of course, those taking meals in the commons must take their meals within a scheduled period. Finally, all of these activities are viewed by the faculty and the staff as constituting a single, rational institutional plan, a career as a student in pursuit of a college degree.

Goffman points out some further characteristics of a total institution. There is a predominance of surveillance over guidance. There is a clearly defined split between members considered to be "staff" and those considered to be "inmates". This split between the two classes of members is often marked by carefully controlled and limited communication between the two groups and sometimes by narrow and hostile stereotyping of each group by the other. The institutional plant is seen as "owned by" or belonging to the staff. Work payment is tied to presence rather than to the quality of the work, attendance is more critical than performance. Finally, total institutional membership is basically incompatible with family life.

It is certainly not the case that the University of Alaska represents a total institution for all students or faculty. It is suggestive, however, to point out some of the comments of students about their presence on the Fairbanks campus. Students point to the apparent concern with keeping

them in school. Students often express the feeling that faculty members are unapproachable, that they wish to remain communicatively separated from students. Observationally it is clear that one rarely sees students present at "open" meetings of the university community. These are regarded as the domain of the faculty. One also sees relatively few faculty members present at "student" events. Perhaps the most frequent student complaint about the nature of their lives on campus is the nearly absolute absence of any sense of privacy or of having their own world. The university is seen as a public place, owned by its faculty and staff. To the extent that attendance is taken as a critical factor in student participation in classes, this also expresses one of the properties suggested by Goffman for a total institution. We notice the emphasis on attendance and not performance in the continuation of students' fellowships and scholarships. Faculty members are often asked to sign off on a student's attendance for continuing funding but grades in courses do not figure into a student's continued funding at such frequent intervals. Finally, the limited on-campus facilities for married students indicates a basic assumption that students are not expected to have families or at least to bring their families with them to campus.

We do not wish to push Goffman's analysis to an extreme in looking at the University of Alaska. Our concern is with suggesting that for at least some students, their presence here on campus may be perceived by them as being housed in a total institution. It should be clear that there are many "causes", only some of which are within the jurisdiction of the university itself. For example, a great number of scholarships are not university-derived and yet the emphasis on attendance of these programs tends to reinforce the totalizing properties of the on-campus student life.

What we wish to emphasize is that if conditions should conspire to give a student the perception of "inmate" status in a total institution, that student may have a very different perception of the university than the one with which we began our thinking in this study.

2.2 The gate

When we began our study our concern was that a certain class of students (Alaska Native students) was not achieving equal access to the resources of the University of Alaska. From that point of view the gatekeeper is seen as someone who is institutionally invested with the power of making decisions which may grant or deny this access. We saw our central concern being the location of these gatekeepers and the situations in which these gatekeeping decisions were being made as a means of discovering how organizational structure may be influencing these decisions. In this view the gate is seen as blocking or providing access to the institution. The gate in this view opens inward.

If we ask how the gate is viewed in a total institution, we see that it opens outward. The role of the gatekeeper is to keep the gate closed against escape and to allow only institutionally approved exit. In this view the role of the institution is to transform the individual and to only allow appropriately transformed individuals to exit. In the total institution the gatekeeper is a guard. In short, retention is the problem.

2.3 Retention

When we began this study we conceived of it as an ethnography of communication at the University of Alaska taking the university itself as a speech community and trying to understand the communication between

that speech community and the Alaska Native speech community. The part of this broader ethnography which has been supported by the National Institute of Education was originally titled "The Organizational Control of Communicative Differences in a Public University." After the decision was made to fund the study it was suggested by NIE that the study be retitled, "Communication Patterns and Retention in a Public University." What is striking now in retrospect is the way in whichthe "retention" model has come to dominate our thinking about the issue of the responsiveness of institutions of higher education to the populations they are mandated to service. In a recent address the chancellor of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Howard A. Cutler, said,

> We, at UAF have reason to be proud of what we have accomplished over the last five years in increasing the retention of our students. (Cutler 1981, p. 1)

In continuing his address he emphasized the factors that have led to higher retentions as well as the factors which characterize drop-outs. It is of interest that this issue of retention was seen fit as the central topic of his convocation address.

During the past two decades retention has been seen as an issue of major national importance. The concern reflected in the titling of this study, the concern of the chancellor of the university, and the large number of studies both local and national of the "problem" of retention reflect a consistent commitment to understanding why students drop out of school. In virtually all of these expressions of concern the wording of the problem appears to reflect the underlying model of the total institution. A widely quoted study has as its title "Preventing Students from Dropping Out" (Astin 1975). The guard-like nature of the gatekeeper's role is clearly displayed in the notion of prevention. What is not often

mentioned, however, in studies of retention is the primarily economic motive for concern. Schreiber more than a decade ago called our attention to the economic base for the concern about school drop-outs (Schreiber 1967). He points out that for the preceding two or three decades there had been an improvement in school retention and yet when John F. Kennedy in his 1963 State of the Union message said,

> The loss of only one year's income due to unemployment is more than the total cost of twelve years of education through high school. Failure to improve educational performance is thus not only poor social policy, it is poor economics. (Schreiber 1967:3)

"retention" became a national economic problem. In other words, the current problem of retention may have at its base an economic motive which began with a presidential urge to cut drop-outs from public schools and which has now been extended to institutions of higher education because of recent trends of lowered college-age populations, higher costs of education and of institutional maintenance, and different perceptions among the population at large about the functions of the public university. It is of concern to universities to retain students for purely business reasons.

Given this economic motive, the total institution model provides a convenient model for maintaining institutional security. It is perhaps overly attractive to those entrusted with the care of the institution because of the control over the comings and goings of its clientele it offers. Without a sophisticated knowledge of the economics of institutions of higher education, students may be reacting to this model as they encounter it from day to day in their movement through the university.

3.0 Multiple models

There is some reason to believe that the model of the total institution is in the background of some of our thinking about the nature of the University

of Alaska. This model is certainly not the only model in operation, however, and it may be important to consider the outcome of having multiple models informing our activities in the university. One outcome of the two models we have considered is a differential treatment of those who leave the institution. The total institution model approves of only one kind of exit, institutionally credentialed exit. All other cases are regarded as having failed in some way. Looking through studies of drop-outs one finds a preponderance of negative values attributed to drop-outs. To use an example close to home, Chancellor Cutler has indicated such factors as

1) more lacking in flexibility to deal with changing circumstances
2) less emotional commitment to education
3) more impulsive
4) have unreal expectations
5) academically rootless

The negative quality of these factors cannot be missed.

While the negative treatment of drop-outs may seem a quite natural response, it is only natural if one assumes the total institution model. As a rough analogy we could take the supermarket as the model for the "access" view of the university as a contrast. There the role of "gatekeepers" is to provide service. We would regard it as inappropriate for some supermarket to base its response to customers on a negative evaluation of those who do not shop there. The approach is to entice customers in and to provide services. Where one sees a drop in the number of customers one looks to ones own services and marketing, not to the weaknesses of the population of customers. It is apparently a characteristic of the total institution model that where there is a mismatch between the expectations of the institution and those of its client population, the

fault is seen to lie in the client population, not in the institution (Taylor and Bogdan 1980).

As a specific instance we may look at a particular case which is typical of the experience of many students at the University of Alaska. This student entered the University of Alaska, Fairbanks with the intention of deciding whether or not she wanted to pursue a college education. This student's plan was to take one year of courses, sampling in a few fields in which she had a tentative interest. On the basis of that sampling she planned to apply to another university outside of the state where she intended to pursue a bachelors degree. At the end of the first year this student "dropped out", moved outside the state and applied for the college of her choice.

The question we need to ask of such a student is whether or not it is appropriate to say that she is "lacking in flexibility", has "less emotional commitment to education", is "more impulsive", has "unreal expectations", or is "academically rootless." Such a student has a clear plan, a definite idea of her educational goals and how to achieve them. In this case one would want to ask if perhaps it wasn't the institution that was "lacking in flexibility".

3.1 Ambiguity

The possibility of multiple models of the nature of the institution is the source of much ambiguity in interpersonal contacts within the institution. If we think of the "gate" having two radically different functions depending on whether it is thought of as being guarded against escape or as being held open to allow entrance we then realize that a gatekeeper is in an ambiguous position. In one model the appropriate

response is to block non-credentialled exit, in the other model the appropriate response is to help qualified individuals to achieve access. Depending on the model, a particular behavior may be viewed as one kind of response or the other.

For a gatekeeper who wants to facilitate the values of the student there is a dilemma. If the student perceives the institution as a total institution and yet wishes to retain a sense of autonomy from the institution, the role of the gatekeeper is one of limiting the control of the institution and ultimately even of providing a convenient exit. The gatekeeper's advocacy of the student's values might be contra-institutional. On the other hand if the student perceives the institution as open then the role of the gatekeeper is one of providing access, of advocating the entrance into and movement through the institution.

The gatekeeping encounter then becomes contingent on these perceptions. If X then Y, but if P then Q. In order to work on behalf of the student the gatekeeper must know whether X or P, that is whether the student perceives the institution as a total institution or as an open institution. But the student may not know this consciously and so the gatekeeper has a work of elicitation to discover for himself or herself and for the student which is the case. If the gatekeeper misjudges, actions intended to increase access may be perceived as more closely guarding the gate, or conversely, actions intended to provide convenient exit may be perceived as blocking access to the institution.

In any more complex situation such as a class where there are several participants the conditions may be mixed. Some participants may be seeking access while others seeking to avoid the totalizing aspects of the institution. If the gatekeeper responds to one group, he or she behaves inappropriately

in regard to the other group. If the gatekeeper tries to remain neutral this amounts to avoiding the responsibilities of the gatekeeper.

These possibilities may have the effect of immobilizing the gatekeeper. This is at least one account of the way in which institutional considerations impinge on the conduct as well as the construction of the gatekeeping encounter. While the goals of the institution are what determine the gatekeeping encounter, these goals may not be clear, unanimously given or understood. They must be determined in order to carry out the gatekeeping and it must be determined to what extent the other participants share these goals or perceptions of the nature of the institution.

One of the most frequent complaints voiced by students is about the paternalism of faculty members, especially those who are most concerned to provide assistance to Alaska Native students. While this is not likely to be amenable to a simple solution, we believe that one central factor is this difference in perceptions of the nature of the institution and how that affects the conduct of the gatekeeping encounter. In many cases students feel a strong pressure from the totalizing aspects of the university. This pressure is sensed as increasing just at the points where decisions are being made. Here where gatekeepers extend their efforts to "help" students, students may be perceiving this "help" as further extension of the totalizing process and resist. In at least a few cases we have known students have given this paternalizing pressure as a reason for "dropping out".

4.0 Mapping the institution

In our original conception of this study we planned to prepare "maps"

of the gatekeeping situations of significance to students. As it has become clearer that there are different models of the nature of the university being held by different participants it has also become clear that there is a different use being made of the maps of the institution. Perhaps the principle difference is that for the faculty, the "map" of the institutioncontained in the catalog is used to determine departmental and jurisdictional boundaries. For students on the other hand, what is sought is a route through the university. For that purpose the catalog is of relatively little use to a student.

A comparison of faculty and student mappings of the university shows a very different perception of a typical experience. The most common student perception of the university, at least of the Fairbanks campus, is that it consists of two quite separate functions. The first function is that of an introduction to college education. For many students the first two years are thought of as for learning about college. Many students assume that once they learn about how to "do" college they will go elsewhere to pursue their college educations. It is, in fact, difficult to find students who will express the assumption that they will start a program and four years later graduate from this college with a degree. At the same time, we see many students transferring into this campus from elsewhere. Chancellor Cutler points out that we regularly enroll more juniors than previous year sophomores and last year we enrolled 16% more seniors than we had juniors the year before.

While the statistics are not as clear as we would like them to be it is clear that there is a very small percentage of students who begin their university educations on the Fairbanks campus and graduate on that campus four years later. The most typical use of the Fairbanks campus is as

either a two year preparation for college elsewhere or a two year termination of programs begun elsewhere. This perception is shared on the whole among students on the Fairbanks campus.

In a "State of the University" address in October of 1980 the President of the University, Jay Barton was asked if this characterization of theuniversity was supported by any statistics. His answer was that he had no statistics which would tell him whether or not such was the case and further that he had never heard of this. What is significant is that this view is that the one supported by the university catalog and by the general structure of four-year university programs. While it is clear enough that students have little or no expectation of spending any consecutive four years pursuing a degree on this campus, the faculty perception of the typical career is that of the standard, four year degree program.

What we would emphasize is not the correctness of either view of the typical use of the university but the difference in perceptions. As was pointed out earlier, where student and faculty views differ it is not uncommon for negative evaluations to be made of each by the other. Students who are planning to transfer to another college and so are taking a variety of courses to see what their interests and talents might be are labeled "academically rootless". Those who intend to go elsewhere, perhaps to a better school, are labeled "emotionally uncommitted to education". On the other hand, faculty members who express a concern for developing consistent, coherent, and sustained academic work may be viewed as insensitive to students' needs or as unconcerned about the plans of their students.

4.1 Locating gates

There is a conceptual trap in the idea of gatekeeping. Because it is a metaphor we might attribute to the gate a concreteness that is not appropriate. Our interest in mapping the gates may be a case of overly concretizing the phenomenon. A specific case might help to clarify this point. Some students have left the Fairbanks campus to go elsewhere or to return home, citing as a reason that they felt life in the dorm was unbearable. Among the factors mentioned is the lack of choice and personal control over their living circumstances in the dorm. This "problem" may be a very complex issue and not resolve itself into any single gate.Some students expect the university to be an open institution in which they can pursue their own course of study, relatively free from control in their private lives and with a range of options in their educational careers. While in the extreme this expectation may be unrealistic, for these students the totalizing nature of the university comes as a surprise. For many of them the first surprise is that while they have indicated a choice of dormitory accomodations on their applications they have been arbitrarily assigned to one large dormitory in which every room is like every other one, the furniture is relatively immobile, and they must live with a roomate who is a complete stranger. While for any student this may be a difficult adjustment, for a student from a rural village with, perhaps, 50 - 100 people this may be extremely uncomfortable. One student mentioned the enormity of not even being able to go to the bathroom without having to run into strangers.

This high level of exposure to a public of strangers is probably most difficult for students from bush and other rural areas of the state. These are certainly the students who comment most frequently on this experience.

It is interesting, then, that quite frequently it is just these students who are arbitrarily assigned to dormitory space without receiving their preferred options.

There is no malicious intent on the part of anyone in this problem. The Housing Office cannot assign rooms until after the student has been accepted by the university. The university cannot accept students until it has received transcripts from the student's high school. For students whose high schools are in rural areas there is a problem because these schools are closed during the summer and frequently do not get transcripts sent out until late in the summer. As a result these students are accepted to the university late in the summer and too late to receive their preferred dormitory assignments. The result of this complex of conditions is that just those students who may most need some range of options in their university housing assignments are unable to receive those options. There is no single point at which we can say a gate is being closed, there is no individual gatekeeper who is either intentionally or unintentionally barring access to the university's resources. The "gate" consists of a variety of factors, the student's perception of the university, the need of housing to control the distribution of space to accepted students, the need of the university to have transcripts from high schools for admission, and the need of rural schools to close for the summer. The "gate" is constituted by a set of institutional practices which are distributed in time from the student's first application to the student's withdrawal and are distributed in space among the housing office, the rural school district, the university office of admissions, and the actual dormitory space assigned to the student.

5.0 Conclusion

A university is a complex social institution. Members of the institution

do not all share the same view of the nature of that institution. In some cases these differences of view may lead to ambiguity of response and interpretation. Perhaps the most critical conflict is in the degree to which the University of Alaska is perceived as a total institution.. There appears to be a fairly high level of discrepancy between embedded institutional structures and stated attitudes as well as fairly large differences between faculty and student perceptions of the functions and structure of the university. These differences make it difficult to unambiguously point to a particular situation and argue that that situation is the root of the retention problem. "Retention" itself implies a particular view of the university which may be inappropriate if viewed from the vantage point of our client population, the students.

While it would be convenient to point to particular situations as the "cause" of the problem of barriers to educational equity, it is becoming clear that these barriers are complex and distributed across both time and space. Institutional "gates" are not concrete objects over which sit literal gatekeepers. Institutional "gates" are complexes of practices and events as well as the interpretations of those events and practices that culminate in the successful career of some students and the blockage of others. We can tentatively conclude this interim report by saying that our original conception of the problem as one of gaining access to the resources of the university is too simple to be productive. By the same token the notion of "retention" implies another, contrasting model which is also too simple a model of the relationship between a university and its client population to be productive. The idea of gatekeeping, while useful, embodies the trap of undue concreteness. The "gates" of the institution must be understood as constituted in networksof institutional practices and values.

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